

TOGETHER ON A PILGRIMAGE

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David Lodge, *Therapy*, Penguin, London, 1998.

The blurb on David Lodge's *Therapy* says 'A successful sitcom writer with plenty of money, a stable marriage, a platonic mistress and a flash car, Lawrence "Tubby" Passmore has more reason than most to be happy. Yet neither physiotherapy nor aromatherapy, cognitive-behaviour therapy nor acupuncture, can cure his puzzling knee pain or his equally inexplicable midlife angst.' It makes no mention of the therapy that succeeds in ridding Passmore of both. Yet it is here that the novel differs from David Lodge's trademark: delightful mix of social comedy and irony.

Lawrence Passmore—most names indicate something about the character—is a "Thatcher Kid". The son of a South London tram driver, Tubby has put his natural talent for theatre to good use and has risen to all that the blurb tells us about him. Therapies are his hobby, but they just don't work for him. The titles of Kierkegaard's books fittingly describe his condition: *Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *The Concept of Dread*. To rid himself of his 'angst', Tubby is writing a journal which changes form to memoir, dramatic monologues and eventually a recapitulation of a pilgrimage. The print outs from Passmore's laptop comprises *Therapy*. Though Tubby's career has followed the Yuppy trajectory, he is markedly different from the usual commercial success story. Somewhere along his career, Tubby has "caught" or "got" values.

This involvement with value manifests itself in many ways: The "compassion fatigue" from which Tubby suffers, his faithfulness to his wife, his help to the "philosophic vagrant" Grahame. But most potently and at considerable financial loss to himself Tubby cannot sacrifice his literary integrity when required to do so by Heartland who produce his sitcom *The People Next Door*. He has not convinced himself that "greed is good", witness his attitude to Grahame, an attitude of guilt tempered with compassion.

Haunting his consciousness and gradually coming into sharper

focus is Maureen Kavanagh, Passmore's first girlfriend whom he has loved and deserted. The chapter entitled 'Maureen: A Memoir' is an excursion into another kind of therapy—psychoanalysis, as Tubby delves deeper and deeper into his 1950's boyhood and comes to the conclusion that much of what he is, much of what ails him is in fact traceable to Maureen. Maureen that Irish-catholic girl with 'convent-school' scruples who refuses to go all the way in Tubby's efforts to explore 'virgin territory', and who therefore he summarily dumps, is in fact the single person who has imbued Tubby's consciousness with value. Tubby, his life now in a shambles—Sally, his wife of thirty years has walked out of the marriage, his outraged efforts to initiate affairs have failed, Heartland is threatening to engage another script writer—turns his back on the mess and initiates a search for Maureen. He must seek 'absolution'.

Thirty-five years and more have intervened. Maureen now married to Tubby's boyhood *bete-noir*, Bede Harrington has her own crosses to bear. She has lost a son, Damien, a relief worker in Angola, to terrorist violence, and the breast Tubby had rhapsodised about in his Memoir has been devoured by cancer. Indéed, there is something almost Hemingway-like in this physical wound whose scar she bears. Yet Maureen has not given up. She is a voluntary nurse, and a Samaritan and when she finds religion no consolation in the loss of her son, she embarks on a pilgrimage. Her motive, as tickmarked in a form she is required to fill, is 'spiritual' in preference to 'religious'. Religion can only point towards the spiritual. It may sometimes be the agent of transformation. Eventually however the spirit must triumph over dogma. In Maureen it has done so.

In 1993 Maureen is walking 2000 kilometres to the shrine of St. James the Apostle reputedly buried in Santiago, Spain. Tubby finds her, footsore but determined on the Camino, the pilgrim route of this centuries old pilgrimage. Nothing will persuade Maureen to give up the pilgrimage or do it on Tubby's 'Richmobile'. The spirit is willing and the flesh must endure. She toils up with Tubby for company—and the knee gives not a twinge—sharing memories of 35 years. Tubby knows his Maureen now. She will not leave her husband for him. She will not agree to any physical intimacy during the pilgrimage, but as they sit together at Finisterre with only sky and ocean and the Milky way for company, Tubby has his absolution. This absolution is not from Maureen who has laughed it off, but from within himself. At this moment and with this woman, Tubby has found himself in his eternal validity.

The novel ends with Tubby's return to London. His flat has been stripped bare by Grahame and must be done up anew. Indeed, Tubby dose up his life anew. His cluttered up existence has been stripped to the essentials and then renewed and restored. Now there is a core to build around—Maureen, that Irish-Catholic woman with scruples that could also be called discipline.

Kierkegaard, whose philosophy forms the basis of this novel talked of the ethical and the aesthetic as two categories of persons. Neither kind is better and both kinds must seek salvation within 'God's mercy'. When one takes the leap into that 'absurd' condition, a condition that cannot be explained logically, an individual finally chooses one's self. Tubby, the aesthetic, and Maureen, the ethical, finally come together on a pilgrimage. The order that eventually comes to Tubby Passmore's life is in fact a form of the existentialist 'Repetition'. Repetition for Kierkegaard is something precious and desirable and it functions on two levels: a restoration of what seems to be lost and the enjoyment of what you have, "the blessed certainty of the instant". Perhaps it is this realisation that brings Tubby his deliverance.